

Meccsa 2018 Conference Paper Discussion – Frameworks of Participation

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1 Abstract: Is Participation in Community Media an Agent of Change?

In accounts of community media, participation is often described as a social process that is linked with social change. By encouraging participation, it is often argued, it should be possible to achieve socially progressive aims, such as civic democracy, social sustainability and the equitable redress of power imbalances. However, different conceptual frameworks of participation relate in different ways to the variable circumstances, practices and outcomes that are encompassed in community media. These differences are difficult to reconcile, as they relate to a wide range of dispositions and social phenomenon, which are themselves variable and indeterminate. The significance of participation as a conceptual tool, then, which is useful in the study of community media, must therefore be tested and re-examined *in situ*, and as it is related to the social practices that are observable. Using Herbert Blumer's concept of neutral social processes, this paper draws on empirical evidence that was gathered from an extended period of ethnographically informed participation in Leicester's community media networks. This study was undertaken as part of a doctoral thesis at the Centre for Commuting and Social Responsibility, De Montfort University, which sought to account for community media practices that were negotiated by agents acting in creative networks and situations. The conceptual underpinning of this study is an adaptation of Herbert Blumer's assertion that social processes are neutral, and thereby necessitate a revaluation of our understanding of the frameworks of expectation that are associated with participative practices (Baugh, 1990; Blumer, 1990; Lauer & Handel, 1983).

2 Accounts of Community Media

In accounts of community media, participation is often described as a social process that is linked with social change.

Lennie and Tacchi state that:

“A single definition of the concept of practice of participation in development is elusive. It is a malleable concept that can be used to signify ‘almost anything that involves people’ and encompasses a wide diversity of practices.”

And that

“In communication and media studies, particularly in the era of Web 2.0, participation is a key concept, and yet it is used to mean ‘everything and nothing.’”

This is particularly problematic, according to Lennie & Tacchi, because in the “new communications environment” we are witnessing a “shift from vertical models of communication to horizontal models,” which implies a “shift from sending messages to providing an opportunity for people to engage in dialogue, share knowledge and ask questions” (Lennie & Tacchi, 2013, p. 10).

Obviously, this means there are some challenges in how we think about and account for participation as a working concept.

- How can a such a foundational concept mean everything and nothing?
- How can we account for participation in its many various, often contradictory forms?
- If participation is one of the dominant concepts on which our understanding of community media is founded, then in what way can we understand its function and what it represents?
- Participation, it seems, is theorised as a major agent of social transformation, but how does this work in practice?

In order to understand what the participative process is, and in what way it is relevant to concepts of community media, we must first be able to identify participation *comprehensibly* and make reliable *observations* and *statements* that produce a clear sense of what the concept and the practice of participation actually refer to.

To adapt Herbert Blumer, participation “seems destined to shape increasingly the framework of human group life” (Blumer, 1990, p. 3).

With participative media forms, and the participative media economy, undergoing prodigious growth and spreading into all parts of social life, we have to remember that:

“The [participative] process does not operate in a social vacuum. It takes place always in a social setting with people, culture, institutions, and social organisations. It is to be expected that if the social settings differ significantly, the changes induced in them by the [participative] process will differ” (Blumer, 1990, p. 134).

3 Study Outline

In January 2009 I registered part-time on a PhD, in which I wanted to identify how and why people made contributions to community media projects.

In the language of the time, this was about trying to understand why people would produce and share, what was then called User Generated Content?

This meant finding and testing a suitable methodology of engagement and observation.

I opted for participant observation approaches and ethnographically informed approaches to data gathering.

With Robert Prus as a key informant and Symbolic Interaction as a pragmatic framework.

I spent a period between September 2012 and June 2014 engaging and volunteering with three community media projects in Leicester.

I primarily worked with:

- John Coster - the founder and organiser of Citizens Eye, a community media networking group that supported training and skills development for local community advocates.
- Dee Bahra - the manager of EvaFM, a community radio station with a remit to engage with Leicester's East African communities.
- Ian Davies - the founder and organiser of the Leicester Peoples Photographic Gallery.

The outcome of these observations thus formed the foundation of my study, as they relate to the lived experiences of people engaged in social action who are seeking to achieve meaningful social accomplishments.

They did this as advocates for their respective communities who were able to adopt and utilise different approaches to community media engagement.

After the primary data collection was completed, and a set of interview and observation transcriptions written up, I needed a framework or model that would help me to contextualise and understand what had been taking place.

I was drawn to Symbolic Interactionism as a conceptual framework because it is founded on pragmatic and empirical principles that seek to explain social interaction as:

- **Relational** – in which people negotiate lines of action in pursuance of their potential accomplishments.
- **Generative** – in which creative agency is foregrounded.
- **Social** – in which the arrangements, patterns and behaviours found in group life are pragmatically understood.

And this tied in with the ethnographically informed practices I'd been using to find out what was going on.

4 Adapting Blumer

To this end I applied Blumer's Symbolic Interactionist approach to social enquiry, in which:

"An analysis of what takes place at these points of contact between the [participative] process and the social setting reveals a different picture. The picture is different in important respects. The initial factors, the x and the y, undergo alteration in interacting with each other, and furthermore, are subject to appreciable change by the entrance of new factors into the process of interaction. One cannot account for the z, the determinate social change, by a combination of x and the y; the determinate social change is the result of a process of development in which the x and the y themselves undergo change and in which other factors than the x and y may enter. What is important is the process of development and not the x and y factors that are presumed to set it off" (Blumer, 1990, p. 141).

In Blumer's view, therefore, Social Arrangements and Meaning are linked.

They are relative and relational concepts, what I have subsequently called 'Socialmeaning.'

As with General Relativity, for example, if mass changes then there is a change in both time and geometry.

Neither factor is the product of the other, nor are they the sole factors from which the other results.

Rather, they are the *setting* and the *processes* by which things are arranged.

- The question that results in adopting this approach, therefore, is what are the processes of development that give us the participatory social arrangements and meanings that we see around us today?

If we change the meanings, then do we change the social setting?

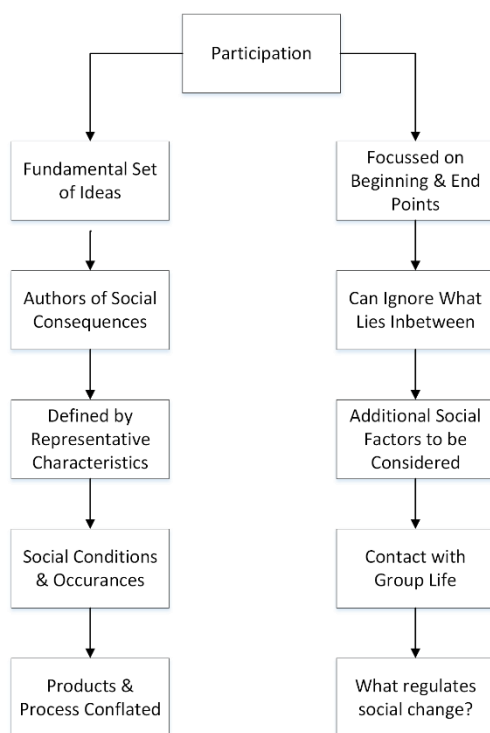
If we change the social setting, then do we also change the meanings?

If the two are relational, then the question is what takes place in the process of arrangement/trans-formation?

5 Social Change in Group Life

According to Herbert Blumer (Blumer, 1990) there are two essential considerations to be accounted for when examining social processes such as participation.

- Firstly, we have to understand the scholarly task by studying, analysing and explaining the social role of participation.
- While secondly, we have to make clear how the study of participation as a social process can guide us through the practical problems of social change that develop in the midst of group life.



This means, according to Blumer, recasting our fundamental approach to understanding participation, as it involves challenging the traditional scholastic approach that views the mechanisms of participation as “a causative agent that produces specific kinds of social consequence” (Blumer, 1990, p. 145).

Adapting Blumer, then, we can consider how:

- Participation is held as a fundamental set of ideas that are the agents and authors of specific social consequences.
- Participation is predominantly studied on the basis that it is possible to identify the representative characteristics of participation, and thus to ground these characteristics into a general set of social conditions and occurrences that take place as the products of the process of participation.
- Research and scholarly concern are more often focussed on the beginning and endpoints of a process of social change, but tend to ignore, or fail to account for, the social processes that lie between.
- Forms of social study give an account of what participation is in principle, and as it can be linked with various end products, but there is little that accounts for, or explains, the features that exist in between.

As Blumer suggests,

If positive relations are found... it is believed that the study has established the causal influence of [participation]. The given conditions that are found are regarded as the product of [participation] (Blumer, 1990, p. 46).

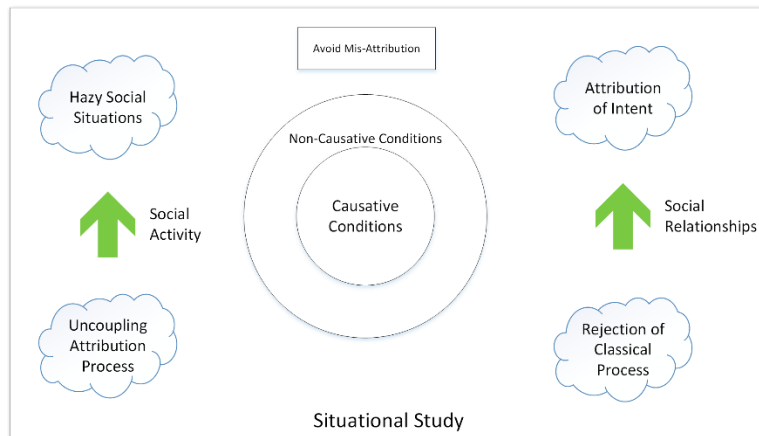
The hazard, according to Blumer, takes the form of two basic deficiencies:

- Firstly, a failure to account for the factors that may provide, by themselves, the social conditions that are attributed to participation.
- And secondly, a failure to understand what happens when the participative media process enters into contact with existing group life.

Blumer suggests that a shift in the research process is necessary, one that pays attention to the wider range of social factors that might otherwise be contributory to social change, rather than the

determinative idea that it is the factors associated with participation alone that regulate social change.

5.1 Causative Conditions



We have to take care to separate the participative forces from the non-participative forces, thus avoiding misidentifying what the participation process is.

We have to make a clear distinction between causative issues and associated issues, thus avoiding *categorical* or *post-hoc* rationalisation.

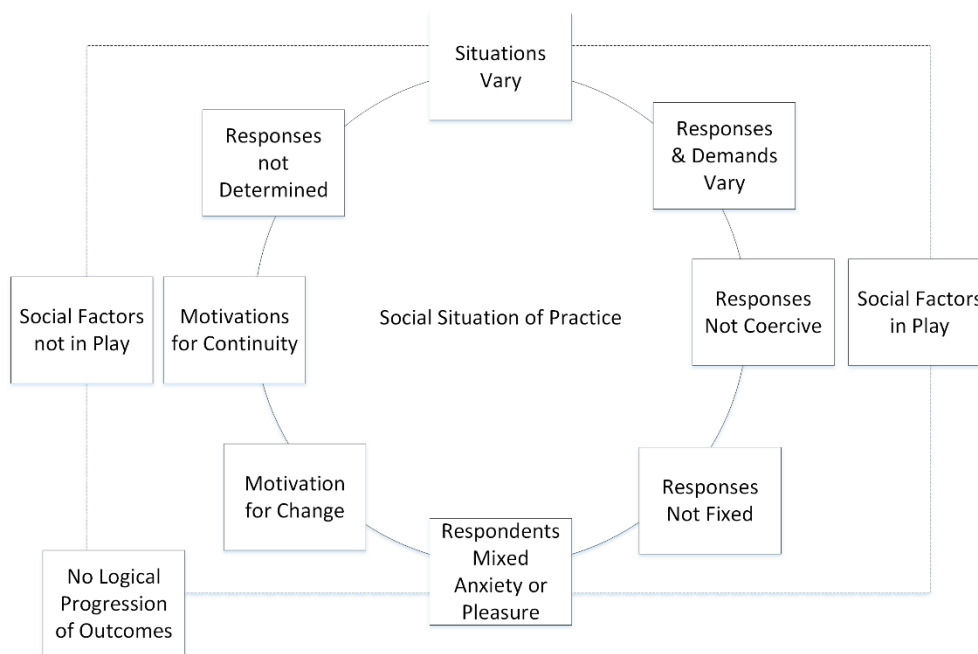
When studying participation, it is not uncommon that our ideas and the sources of these ideas will be hazy.

The challenge, according to Blumer, is to be diligent about what other social factors might be at play, and to avoid attributing these factors to a causative condition that are either inherent in the process of participation, or the social conditions in which they are played out.

This requires a rejection of conventional ideas of classical (i.e. linear) research procedures, and involves an uncoupling of the attributions of the process of participation from the assumptions of what constitutes the product of the process of participation.

According to Blumer, it is possible to pay attention to the demands and opportunities for new forms of social activity and social relationships that emerge, but which cannot be inferred in the operation of participation alone.

The study of the situation, according to Blumer, is therefore the only mechanism by which we will ascertain any knowledge of the interplay of ideas and practices associated with participative media, rather than simply relying on hearsay or supposition (or theorising).



Studying the social situation in which the process of participation is practiced means that we are able to see how “people respond to the demands and opportunities that are set in the situation” (Blumer, 1990, p. 157).

6 Situated Observation

These situations vary, and they are suggestive of a range of responses and demands.

These responses, however, are not coercive, nor are they uniform or follow fixed patterns.

Instead, people bring multiple sets of views, different values, different expectations, and thereby, different definitions and interpretations of the situations that they are associated with.

The engagement with forms of participatory media practice may be met with enthusiasm, or they may be met with anxiety.

Participants may be reluctant, dismayed or resentful, or they may be supportive, hopeful or appreciative.

Some may be motivated to pursue change, others to hold-the-line based on what they know to be common and shared.

What we cannot do though, according to Blumer, is to assume that those differential responses are determined in the situations, and therefore inferred in the process of participation itself.

As Blumer notes, if we study the process of participation through the social instances that are in play, then we also need to study social instances where participation is not in play, or in which it takes different forms.

Primarily, we should avoid attributing to participation any “social happenings that may be due to other factors” (Blumer, 1990, p. 160).

This means overturning the expectations that we can simply compare a given set of features of participatory practices, and note the social consequences of those practices, as if the relationship between them is structured into a logical progression of outcomes.

This mode of procedure, as Blumer notes, “would be legitimate if the larger social process did not share in the relation” (Blumer, 1990, p. 160).

However, and much to the consternation of many scholars, the relationship between what is inferred in the social process of participation, is only comprehensible when it is accounted for in the experience of group life.

Therefore, and according to Blumer, the task of scholarship is to study how social policy helps to shape social developments as forms of participation are enacted and played out.

Scholarship would thus be able to advise and inform the development of social policies that can be realistically applied to different social situations.

As Blumer argues

The situations that arise under early [instances of media participation] should be scrutinised to see how the application of divergent policies structure the situations and set lines of response to them. Careful and sustained study of this sort should lead to a valuable body of knowledge (Blumer, 1990, p. 166).

7 Group Life

Symbolic Interaction views social life in the following terms:

- “Human group life is intersubjective...
- Human group life is (multi) perspectival...
- Human group life is reflective...
- Human group life is activity-based...
- Human group life is negotiable...
- Human group life is relational...
- Human group life is processual” (Prus, 1996, pp. 15-17).

Blumer recommends that we seek to understand social change based on evidence gathered from:

- The structure of occupations and positions...
- The filling of occupations, jobs and positions...
- A new ecological arrangement...
- A regime of industrial work...
- A new structure of social relations...
- New interests and new interest groups...
- Monetary and contractual relations...
- Goods produced by the manufacturing process...
- Patterns of income of industrial personnel” (Blumer, 1990, pp. 42-46).

8 Critiquing Participation

It will be useful to consider, therefore, how participation has been accounted for from a number of different viewpoints associated with community media and its social practices, before identifying how we can move to an empirically grounded and pragmatic view of participation, as it is enacted in group life.

We can divide this into corresponding models, or alternative frames of reference, each linked to a representative approach that outlines the main features of each view of participation, thus helping to evaluate the relative practical application of each.

The first view to be considered can be summarised in Margaret Ledwith and Jane Springett's *Participatory Practice – Community Based Action for Transformative Change* (Ledwith & Springett, 2010), which is associated with counter-hegemonic approaches to issues of social participation.

The second approach is Jim Ife's *Community Development in an Uncertain World* (Ife, 2013), which is associated with an ecological view of community development.

This is followed by Porta and Mattoni's view of civic participation (Porta & Mattoni, 2013), then by Henry Jenkins, Ford and Green's *Spreadable Media* model (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), which offers a techno-centric approach to participation and media distribution.

Finally, this is followed by a brief overview of the concept of rhizomic and arbolic forms of media as associated with Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013).

Many other forms of analysis are relevant, such as regulatory, policy, discourse or content analysis approaches, which would also offer noteworthy grounds for comparison if space allowed.

However, the examples selected here should be sufficient to open up space for discussion from which we can consider how other, alternative or competing frames of reference, might be appraised in practice.

We can map out these alternative dispositions and modes of engagement:

Table 1 Participative Framework

Social Arrange-ment	Form of Partici-pation	Main Media Forms	Aims	Ideal Commu-nity Type	Mode of En-gagement
Hegemonic	Counter-Force	Oppositional	Emancipation	Discursive	Activist
Ecological	Pluralist	Diverse	Sustainability	Holistic	Steward
Civic	Representation	Public Sphere	Association	Deliberative	Representative
Techno-centric	Generative	Spreadable	Globalisation	Networked	Collaborator
Rhizomatic	Ironic	De-Territorial-ised	Fluidity	Nomadic	Cipher
Commercial	Customer	Sticky	Profit	Market	Consumer
Administrative	Instrumental	System	Efficiency	Information	Inspector
Managerial	Subordinate	Organisation	Perpetuation	Hierarchical	Devotees

Traditional critical media studies approaches have accounted for community, alternative and collaborative media as the *product* of a social order, imbued with distinct, though hidden power relations.

The green and ecological framework reminds us of the needs of the biosphere; and the potential for community and collaborative media to fulfil a role in supporting the civic realm.

Technology is seen as providing a significant underpinning to the forms of communication that we use in social interaction; which leads to potential forms and social structures that move on from the centralised and linear forms of the past.

In looking at these different examples we are reminded that the ethical and political (i.e. tactical) lifeworlds that people operate in are framed in notably different ways (Henderson, 2013).

The challenge of making the shift from one lexicon to another, is therefore found in the way that we accommodate the practical functions of organisation and supervision that support and enable public and ethical regimes of practice-based participation, particularly as they emerge and play-out of their environmental or civil dispositions.

There is no ultimate goal to be aimed for in promoting and articulating community and collaborative media participation that is determined by any of the accounts listed so far, other than the immediate practical concerns of engagement and accomplishment, and coupled with the management of personal, civic and environmental balance and sustainability.

This does not mean that a sense of social justice is excluded from the range of possibilities that one might want to see enacted through community and collaborative media.

Rather, this shift to the ethical and the tactical simply puts participation in its proper position, recognising that it is only through *continuous conversation* and the *redescription* of the *vocabularies* and *symbolic frames*, i.e. the interplay of congruent and incongruent vocabularies (Rorty, 1982, 1989), that it will be possible to support change.

As Richard Rorty reminds us, “the terms used by the founders of a new form of cultured life will consist largely in borrowings from the vocabularies of the culture which they are hoping to replace” (Rorty, 1989 p.56).

It is commonplace, according to Rorty, that we will begin to have doubts about what we are doing and the way that we explain to ourselves what it is that we are doing.

So at some point the stories that we tell ourselves about what we do and why we do it will become “incommensurable” with those we have used previously (Rorty, 2009, p. 386).

We are bound together by the “common vocabularies and common hopes” that our vocabularies and stories tell about the future, as well as the “outcomes which compensate for present sacrifices” (Rorty, 1989 p.86).

So, if we can understand the differences that these vocabularies and stories make, then we may be able to understand how the aims and hopes for the future that we hold are going to be brought about.

In undertaking these practical observations, it would not be necessary to introduce further concepts that help to frame the practice of agents acting in their lifeworlds, beyond the participative experiences found and defined by the *agents themselves* acting in those lifeworlds.

Therefore, the relevant question remains, is participation an agent of social change? And the only way to answer this question is to observe people taking up and making roles, and thus participating in social life.

9 Anticipating Social Change and Applying Lessons

Therefore, it is possible to state that the introduction of participation as a social process has the following characteristics:

1. The participatory process is neutral and is observable at the lines of entry to group life.
2. A range of diverse alternative social developments are possible in regard to this framework.
3. The participative process does not determine or account for the alternative routines and dispositions that come into play.

This means, therefore, that we can state that:

While social change is common and dynamic in these social settings, and following the lines of entry and influence, participation, in itself, does not determine this change.

Participation does not operate in isolation, under ideal conditions, instead, participation takes place in social settings, as part of a culture that is represented by institutions, and alternative forms of social organisation, sometimes competing and sometimes uniform.

Different responses to the process of participation will differ in different settings, but they are not determined by the process of participation.

The participative process, therefore, should be seen as comprised of emergent situations in which these activities are developed, these relationships are formed, these social organisations are negotiated, which are based on the many ways that people meet in different situations, and call on “varying schemes of interpretation and set of expectations, inside a framework of traditional and contemporary pressures” (Blumer, 1990, p. 150).

People fashion their activity in different situations on the basis of the potential lines of accomplishment that they can define and negotiate.

So, in seeking a realistic and workable understanding of participation as a social process, and how it might potentially act as an agent of social change, it is necessary to identify those features that can be traced as they work in the collective life of specific groups.

In Blumer's analysis of the process of industrialisation he identifies nine lines of contact and entry along which social change is induced, which can be adapted and used here in developing our understanding of how the process of media participation works.

As Blumer explains, 'these nine dimensions may be thought of as a framework inside which group life must fit' (Blumer, 1990, p. 42). These are:

1. "A structure of occupations and positions...
2. The filling of occupations, jobs and positions...
3. A new ecological arrangement...
4. A regime of industrial work...
5. A new structure of social relations...
6. New interests and new interest groups...
7. Monetary and contractual relations...
8. Goods produced by the manufacturing process...
9. Patterns of income of industrial personnel" (p.42-46).

As people come to different situations with different points of view, and different expectations, then they will define these situations differently, and thereafter the resulting activity will always vary.

Attributing these definitions and accomplishments to the participatory process alone will misconstrue what is happening.

Blumer's five steps of this process can be adapted here:

1. Identification of what is meant by participation.
2. Identification of the participatory process.

3. Identification of the major points of context of the participative process in group life.
4. General awareness of the larger social process.
5. Identification of what takes place at the points of contact.

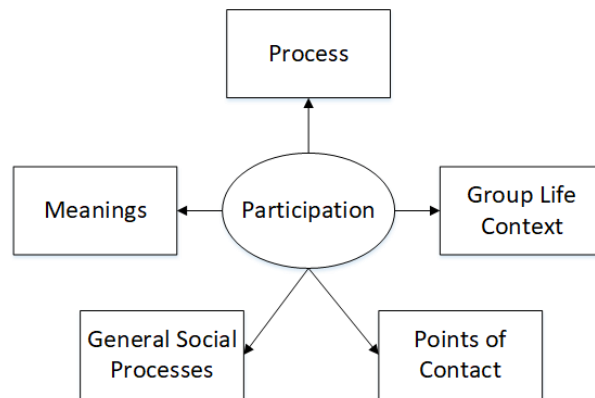


Figure 1 Identification of Participation Process

As Blumer states

The only way one can be sure that [participation] has, in fact, initiated social changes is to study what takes place at the points at which such changes arise, namely, at the points of entry of the [participation] process into group life (Blumer, 1990, p. 155).

None of these stages of enquiry can be skipped, according to Blumer, if we are to be certain that participation is an agent of social change.

The social consequences that flow from this process do not originate in the logic and facets of participation, but are instead the products of the negotiated interactions that emerge in group life: the behaviours, the dispositions, the expectations, and so on.

Participation can thus be regarded as an occasion for social change, but not a determinant of social change.

The impact of this view is that it frees the observer and the scholar to look anew at the framework of policy decisions that are associated with these forms of social change.

As there are no fixed links between the elements of participation, the social situations in which participative practices are enacted, or any ultimate ends and destinations for these changes, we are freed up to look anew at those things that facilitate or obstruct social change.

Wider issues can be considered.

Alternative frameworks of expectation can be plotted.

Different styles of interaction can be played-out.

There is no determination of social change, only a pragmatic test that recognises that policy can be wide-ranging and vary in the concerns that it seeks to address.

If participation as a concept is representative of a range of dynamic forms of social interaction, then the guidance that is offered for successful understanding in different situations will also vary.

Blumer concludes

In place of preoccupation with a dubious problem of the social effects of [participation], concern should turn to the problems of how social policies may be effective in guiding and controlling social changes under [participation]" (Blumer, 1990, p. 166).

There are many functions that have to be considered in relation to participation, and the changes that it brings.

Reasonably good knowledge and awareness of these multiple processes, therefore, is the prerequisite to effective study as they play out in group life.

To repeat and adapt Blumer's assertion, participation is a neutral social process, and so we are drawn, as a consequence, to the fact that the people who define, adopt and play out these roles, and thereby endorse different lines of action in pursuit of social accomplishment (the very indicator of social change), are not neutral, and that they are themselves the agents and drivers of social change. This, then, is the ongoing process that is in need of further study, and provides a retort to the question asked earlier.

The social process of participation is neutral, but people's objectives are goal driven and therefore divergent, and this is what qualifies as social change.

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